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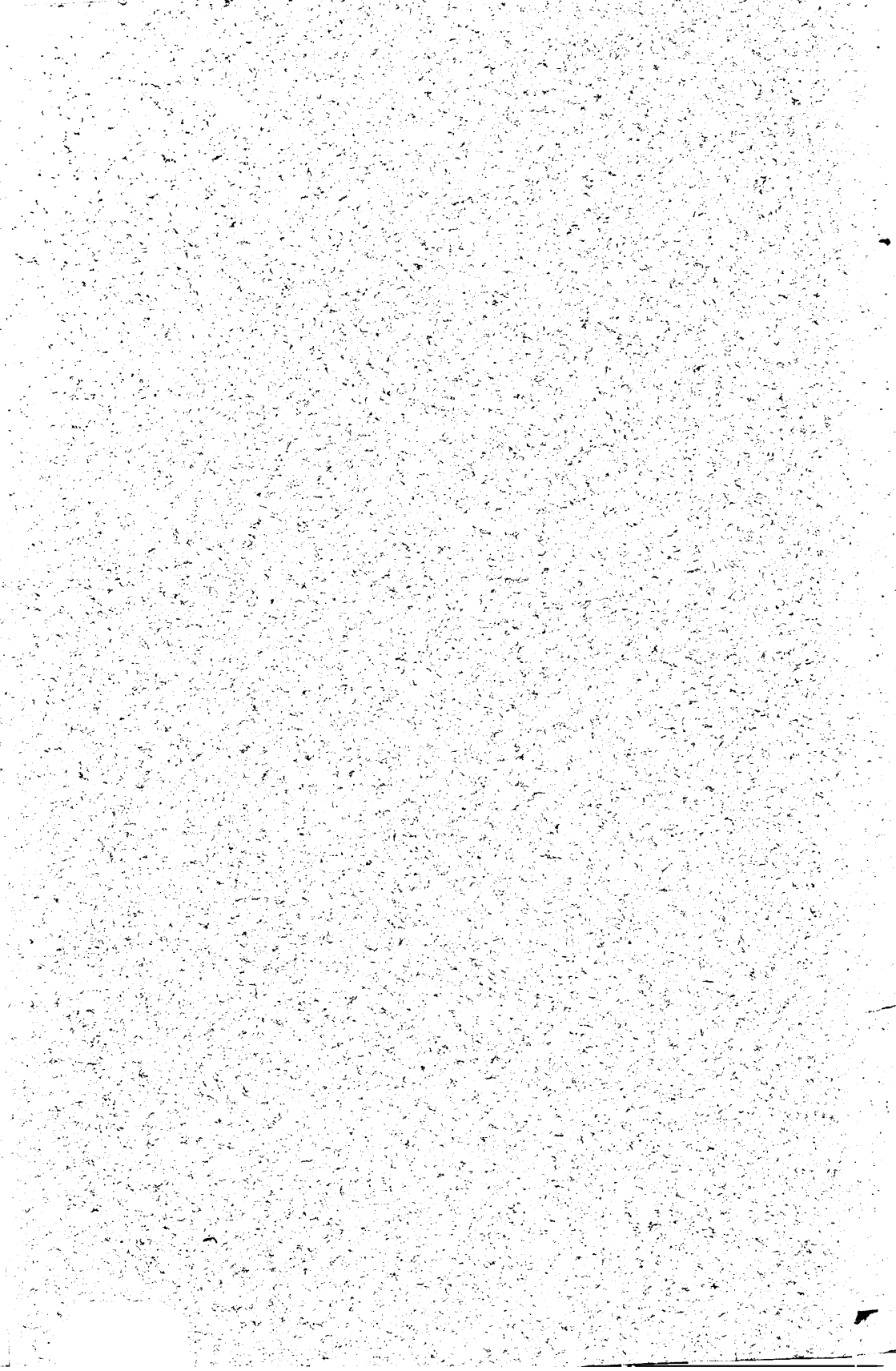
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A STUDY OF THE SUPERNATURAL IN
THREE PLAYS OF SHAKESPEARE

By EDWIN WILEY, Ph.D.

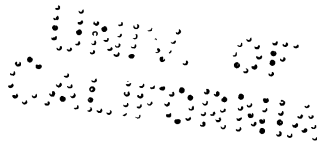
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EDWIN WILEY

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A STUDY OF THE SUPERNATURAL IN THREE
PLAYS OF SHAKESPEARE

EDWIN WILEY

I
JULIUS CAESAR

The plays of Shakespeare are so universal in scope, and their method so objective, that there is danger of going astray in drawing conclusions from isolated passages. The fact is sometimes lost sight of, that the poet was primarily a creative artist, whose creed, as we know, not only from his work, but his words as well, was to hold the mirror up to nature, and to give the form and pressure of the time. We cannot be justified in asserting that he desired to formulate any system of religion, ethics, or philosophy, yet he has been cited as an advocate of all beliefs and no belief; an idealist, sensualist, humanist, and what not; a determinist and an indeterminist, etc. These inferences have been drawn from his work, and, perhaps, with good reason, for the materials of his art were the primary sources of all systems of knowledge and belief: nature and human experience. In common with all creative spirits of the highest type, his nature was plastic and sympathetic rather than dogmatic; mediatorial rather than partisan. Thus it is that, even in the portrayal of a character so hateful to his own age as that of Shylock, he could

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not avoid instilling a certain element of sympathy and brotherhood into his creation, thereby rendering *The Merchant of Venice* to the minds of many a tragedy rather than the comedy first intended.

It would, however, be equally erroneous to assume that one of such power and insight as Shakespeare could concern himself with the infinite variety of human relations and collisions without formulating some sort of theory regarding the hidden forces of which they are the outward expression. Just what this theory is in the case of Shakespeare may never be faithfully determined, yet if his works be taken as a whole, its outlines may be distinguished. Thus we know, from comparative and chronological study that his plays fall into three groups: (1) the lyric and objective productions of his youth, when he seemed to be concerned mainly with the problems of his art; (2) the more serious and ultimately, tragic creations, which concern themselves with the tremendous issues of evil, of destiny, of death; and (3) the final utterances of his genius, which apparently indicate that he has attained an understanding of life's darker questions and points a way of solving them. That this rough grouping may be justified is shown not only by the spirit of the plays, but also by the themes he selected for treatment during the different periods of his creative activity. That *Richard III* and *Romeo and Juliet* fall within the first group does not invalidate the point made, for the first is essentially a part of the chronicle plays upon which he had been working; and the other is the portrayal of the beauty and poetry of love; the tragic fate of the lovers, one might say, being little more than an incident, and, indeed, relatively unmotivated. A comparison of this play with that of *Othello* clearly reveals how far they are separated in spirit.

Just what influences entered into the poet's life to cause him to pass almost abruptly from comedy to tragedy, we do not know. The *Sonnets* offer a certain explanation, and one that must be accepted, until it is proved beyond question

that they are merely artistic conceits and not the records of a personal experience. Whatever the external causes, this much we may be sure of, that the more serious aspects of life began to influence Shakespeare's art about the end of the sixteenth century. This mood, suggested in his brightest comedy, *As You Like It*, by the character of Jacques, deepens in the tragi-comedies of *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Measure for Measure*; and finds its definitive expression in *Julius Caesar* and *Hamlet*. For nearly a decade the problem of evil held him as in a spell, and he studied it from every aspect, from its origin in thought to its flowering in deed; apparently seeking throughout all its explanation and ultimate cause.

Doubtless the last thing Shakespeare desired to be was preacher or moralist. Yet since morality is based upon human relations, as is the drama itself, there are ethical implications in the plays that cannot be reasoned away. Now granting that there is persistence of human personality after death, and that a supernatural world truly subsists, it is clear that man has certain affiliations with that world. Ethical responsibility, therefore, does not cease with human relations, but extends to the spiritual cosmos as well. These facts have been so universally accepted that the greatest minds of all ages have been seeking the laws that determine these wider affiliations of the human soul. In face of Shakespeare's knowledge and extensive use of material drawn from the lore of the supernatural, it would be remarkable did we fail to discover in the plays any treatment in dramatic form of man's relation to the world of spirit. That he essays these very problems the most casual study of *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* would seem to verify.

Julius Caesar is noteworthy for several reasons; it is the first of that tremendous series of tragedies that ends with *Timon of Athens* and *Coriolanus*; the first in which Shakespeare makes use of materials found in Plutarch's *Lives*; and the first in which the supernatural assumes an organic

relation to the play as a whole. The study of his attitude respecting the supernatural, is, however, rendered difficult by the fact that the whole drama is little more than an artistic transmutation of Plutarch's narratives of the lives of Caesar, Antony, and Brutus, as Englished by North. The age of Plutarch was one of religious and philosophic chaos; the ancient faiths had lost their hold upon the people, who became victims of all sorts of cults, or were openly sceptical. The higher classes and the scholars, however, had substituted philosophy for religion, and here confusion also reigned, for every kind of sophistry and philosophical vagary had its adherents, the general trend being towards some form of scepticism, such as Pyrrhonism, Epicureanism, or Stoicism.¹ Plutarch, however, was a Neo-Platonist, a mystic, and a bitter opponent of Epicureanism, hence we find a certain stressing of the supernatural in his works.² He was likewise, profoundly interested in problems of occult philosophy, and in his essay *On Isis and Osiris* develops a highly dualistic theory of good and evil. He also claimed to have been an initiate into the Dionysic mysteries.

Therefore Shakespeare found in the sources of *Julius Caesar* a systematization of supernatural lore. This seems to have made a profound impression upon him, for hints given in Plutarch are strongly emphasized in the play. In particular has he taken the incident of the appearance of the apparition to Brutus and elaborated it so as to portray the spirit of Caesar as potent after death as the living Caesar was before. Plutarch does not assert that the apparition which appeared to Brutus on the night before the battle of Philippi was the ghost of the dead Caesar. Shake-

¹ Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. I, chap. 2.

² *On superstition. On Isis and Osiris. On the cessation of Oracles. On the Pythian responses. On the daemon of Socrates. Letter of consolation to his wife.* Cf. Super, *Between Heathenism and Christianity* (N. Y., 1899). Gréard, *De la Morale de Plutarque* (P., 1902). Volkman, R., *Leben, Schriften und Philosophie des Plutarch von Chaeronea* (Berl., 1893). Oaksmith, John, *Religion of Plutarch* (L., 1902).

spare, however, has so interpreted it, rendering the inference necessary that he proposed to portray the disembodied spirit of Caesar as still active, and battling invisibly with Antony and Octavius against Brutus and Cassius. This interpretation perhaps explains one fact that has proved puzzling, which is the naming of the play. Viewed in any other way, Brutus would have been more appropriate for the title, but the inference is clear that Caesar, both incarnate and discarnate, should be conceived as the protagonist of the drama.

As so much of the element of the supernatural is found in Plutarch, *Julius Caesar* does not offer, therefore, as clear a statement of Shakespeare's use of this material as *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, yet the fact that he retains and emphasizes all of it, renders it a useful commentary on the succeeding plays. It has already been indicated that nearly all phases of occult phenomena are used in *Julius Caesar*: prophecies are uttered, prodigies and omens appear on the earth and in the skies; strange dreams are recounted; a ghost appears; and the spirits of the departed incite men to deeds of revenge, or forecast their defeat and death.

It is not clear that we are to understand that the spirit of Pompey the Great is inspiring Cassius to conspire against Caesar, yet a passage in Plutarch and several in the play would suggest such inference. In Plutarch's *Life of Caesar*, the following passage occurs:

It is also reported, that Cassius (though otherwise he did favor the doctrine of Epicurus), beholding the image of Pompey, before they entered into the action of their traitorous enterprise, he did softly call upon it, to aide him: but the instant danger of the present time, taking away his former reason, did sodainly put him into a furious passion, and made him like a man half beside himself.

The passages in the play regarding Pompey's spirit do not prove this point, but the continual allusions to his memory are suggestive:

Marullus—

O you hard hearts, you cruel men of Rome,
Knew you not Pompey
. (I:1:41)

Cassius—

They stay for me
In Pompey's porch.
. (I:3:125)

Brutus—

How many times shall Caesar bleed in sport
That now on Pompey's basis lies along
No worthier than the dust!
. (III:1:114)

Antony—

Even at the base of Pompey's statua,
That all the while ran blood. (III:2:192)

There can be no doubt, however, of the poet's intention regarding the existence and intervention of the spirit of Caesar. Any interpretation that views the apparitions of Caesar, perceived by Brutus at Sardis and the night before the battle of Philippi, as subjective hallucinations, is utterly indefensible and tends to break down the dramatic unity of the play. A citation of passages suffices to prove this point:

Brutus—

Let us be sacrificers, but not butchers, Caius.
We all stand up against the spirit of Caesar;
O! then that we could come by Caesar's spirit,
And not dismember Caesar. But, alas!
Caesar must bleed for it.
. (II:1:166)

Antony—

If then thy spirit look upon us now,
Shall it not grieve thee dearer than thy death,
To see thy Antony making his peace,
Shaking the bloody fingers of thy foes.
. (III:1:195)

Antony—

And Caesar's spirit, ranging for revenge, .
With Ate by his side come hot from hell,
Shall in these confines with a monarch's voice
Cry 'Havoc,' and let slip the dogs of war.
. (III:1:270)

Antony thus invokes the spirit of Caesar, and as a result is infused with a spirit and power that amazes the conspirators. The one whom Brutus scorned as a mere "limb of Caesar," "a reveller, given to sports, to wildness, and much company" becomes transformed into an inspired orator, an able general, and the most powerful agent in procuring the downfall of the cause of the conspirators. The presence of Caesar's avenging spirit is indicated throughout the whole of the scenes following his murder. Bad luck, dissension, and disaster haunt Brutus and Cassius, until they are finally stricken with a sort of panic that hurries them to their doom.

Not only this, but the spirit of Caesar, itself, appears to Brutus, characterizing itself as his "evil spirit":

(Enter the Ghost of Caesar.)

Brutus—

How ill this taper burns! Ha! who comes here?
I think it is the weakness of mine eyes
Art thou some god, some angel, or some devil,
That shapes this monstrous apparition.
It comes upon me. Art thou anything?
That mak'st my blood cold and my hair to stare?
Speak to me what thou art!

Ghost—

Thy evil spirit, Brutus.

Brutus—

Why comest thou?

Ghost—

To tell thee thou shalt see me at Philippi!

Brutus—

Well; then I shall see thee again?

Ghost—

Ay, at Philippi.

Brutus—

Why, I will see thee at Philippi then.

(Ghost vanishes.)

Now I have taken heart thou vanishest:
Ill spirit, I would hold more talk with thee.
Boy, Lucius! Varro! Claudius! Sirs, awake!

² *Julius Caesar*, II:1:165, 188-9.

Brutus—

Didst thou see anything?

Luc.—

Nothing my lord.

(IV:3:275)

Volumnius—

What says my lord?

Brutus—

Why this, Volumnius:

The ghost of Caesar hath appear'd to me

Two several times by night; at Sardis once,

And this last night here at Philippi's fields.

I know my hour is come.

(V:5:16)

The failure to obtain a just perspective of the part played by the supernatural in *Julius Caesar* has led to some strange vagaries of criticism. The most noteworthy are those which concern themselves with two details of the play in which the poet deviates radically from the narrative of Plutarch—with the stressing of the infirmities and pettiness of the man Caesar, and the changing of the phantom which appears to Brutus from a "monstrous spirit" to "Caesar's ghost." With regard to the first point Professor Dowden quotes with approval the following passage from Gervinus:

The poet, if he intended to make the attempt of the republicans his main theme, could not have ventured to create too great an interest in Caesar; it was necessary to keep him in the background, and to present that view of him which gave a reason for the conspiracy.⁴

This interpretation, however, appears far-fetched, and if Caesar's spirit be viewed as a reality, is an assumption hardly justified by the facts of the play. Although the parts of Brutus and Cassius have permitted ambitious actors so to stress their phase of the action, that it has commanded the interest and sympathies of the hearers, it seems that the intention of the play is clear. As has been suggested, we have no reason for assuming that Shakespeare differed so strongly from his age as to deny the fact of the

⁴ Dowden, *Shakespeare—His mind and art*, p. 254.

soul, nor that the soul used the body merely as a temporary dwelling place. Nor does he lead us to infer that great souls always reside in god-like bodies; his own experience in life would effectually disprove that. Therefore, in portraying Caesar as somewhat of a physical weakling, the poet is endeavoring to express the thought that Caesar's spirit was greater than his body, and far more powerful than his enemies foreknew. He was the one man of the time necessary to the unfolding of his nation's evolution, against whom the forces of conservatism fight in vain.

Again Professor Dowden says:

The ghost of Caesar (designated by Plutarch only the 'evil spirit' of Brutus), which appears on the night before the battle of Philippi, serves as a kind of visible symbol of the vast posthumous power of the dictator.⁵

If this be true, then why the need for changing the apparition from "a monstrous spirit" to the "ghost of Caesar"? Using the argument of the simplest explanation for a phenomenon, is not the interpretation that Shakespeare intended to portray the actual ghost of Caesar not only more true to the situation, but also more effective from the point of view of dramatic art? There is, however, a still more powerful justification of this theory; which is that the whole play represents the transition from the materialistic philosophy to spiritualistic. We know that Caesar and Cassius were Epicureans, the basis of whose philosophy was a denial of all things outside of the sphere of the senses. Yet what do we find in the play? Thus Calpurnia, who seems to have shared Caesar's scepticism, disturbed by her dream and the many omens, says:

Caesar, I never stood on ceremonies,
Yet now they fright me. (II:2:13)

Caesar himself is unnerved and, in spite of his large boasts, resolves to absent himself from the senate, thus laying himself open to the taunt of Decius:

⁵ Dowden, *Shakespeare—His mind and art*, p. 255.

'Break up the senate till another time,
When Caesar's wife shall meet with better dreams,'
(II:2:98)

and the scornful comment of Cassius:

But is is doubtful yet
Whether Caesar will come forth today or no;
For he is superstitious grown of late,
Quite from the main opinion he held once
Of fantasy, of dreams, of ceremonies. (II:1:193)

Yet the materialism of Cassius was likewise destined to tremble under the blows of his experience:

Cassius—

Messala,

This is my birth-day; as this very day
Was Cassius born. Give me thy hand, Messala:
Be thou my witness that against my will,
As Pompey was, am I compell'd to set
Upon one battle all our liberties.

You know that I held Epicurus strong,
And his opinion; now I change my mind
And partly credit things that do presage.
Coming from Sardis, on our former ensign
Two mighty eagles fell, and there they perch'd
Gorging and feeding from our soldiers' hands;
Who to Philippi here consorted us:
This morning they are fled away and gone;
And in their stead do ravens, crows and kites
Fly o'er our heads, and downward look on us,
As we were sickly prey: their shadows seem
A canopy most fatal, under which
Our army lies, ready to give up the ghost.

(V:I:71)

Brutus, however, was not an Epicurean but a Stoic, and was the son-in-law of Cato the Stoic, from whom Portia, his wife, inherited the quality of fortitude revealed in the play.⁶ Brutus condemned Cato as untrue to the Stoic philosophy in committing suicide after the battle of Thapsus, and himself played the Stoic's part most con-

⁶ *Julius Caesar*, II:1:291.

sistently, meeting all things good and evil with a serene and rational spirit. Without a tremor, he killed his best friend for the cause of the state; he so thoroughly concealed his grief for his dead wife, the dearly loved Portia, that Cassius does not suspect it until he is told; and last, but not of least suggestiveness, carried a book in his pocket on the battlefield. Yet this same fatalist is thrown into a panic by a specter, and both he and his wife commit the crime of self-slaughter, which he had deemed impossible according to his philosophy:

Brutus—

Even by the rule of that philosophy
By which I did blame Cato for the death
Which he did give himself; I know not how,
But I do find it cowardly, and vile,
For fear of what might fall, so to prevent
The time of life: arming myself with patience,
To stay the providence of some high powers
That govern us below.

Cassius—

Then if we lose this battle,
You are content to be led in triumph
Through the streets of Rome?

Brutus—

No, Cassius, no: think no, thou noble Roman,
That ever Brutus will go bound to Rome;
He bears too great a mind. But this same day
Must end that work the ideas of March begun;
And whether we shall meet again I know not.
Therefore our everlasting farewell take:
For ever and forever, farewell, Cassius!
For if we do meet again, why, we shall smile:
If not, why then, this parting was well made.

(V:1:101)

Thus with the shadow of fate upon them, both went to their self-sought deaths. "Mistrust of good success," says Messala, was the explanation of their failure, but Brutus and Cassius had a different one:

Cassius—

Guide thou the sword. Caesar, thou art reveng'd,
Even with the sword that killed thee. (*Dies.*)

(V:3:46)

Brutus—

Titinius' face is upward.

Cato—

He is slain.

Brutus—

O Julius Caesar! thou art mighty yet!
Thy spirit walks abroad, and turns our swords
In our proper entrails.

(V:3:96)

Brutus—

Farewell, good Strato. (*He runs on his sword.*)

Caesar now be still;

I kill'd not thee with half so good a will.

(V:5:50)

II

HAMLET

The story of Julius Caesar appears to have made a powerful impression upon Shakespeare, as references to it are to be found in both *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*¹ and later he reverts to Plutarch and carries the life of Marc Antony to its logical end in *Antony and Cleopatra*. He does not wait so long, however, before occupying himself with the theme of supernatural interference with the concerns of men. It is generally conceded that *Hamlet* was written immediately after *Julius Caesar*, probably between the dates 1600–1602.² The source for this play was Belleforests's *Histoires tragiques*, which contained the story of *Amleth of Denmark*, taken from the medieval Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus. There was also an earlier version of the play, now lost, referred to in Thomas Nashe's introduction to Green's *Menaphon*, which may have supplied the immediate outline of the play. The earlier versions of the story of *Hamlet*, however, contain little of those elements that render it one of the superlative creations of literature. They are bald recitals of treachery, murder, and revenge attained by shammed insanity. Such materials in the hands of a mediocre talent assume the form of Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*; in the hands of genius, *Hamlet*. Now the most important additions made by Shakespeare are the supernatural elements, the peculiar and elusive personality of the chief character, and finally the marvellous passages so full of wit and wisdom.

In its most important aspect the play is a study of the supernatural, and though the heart of Hamlet's mystery

¹ *Hamlet*, I:1:112; V:1:235; *Macbeth*, III:1:56; V:8:1.

² Entered in the Stationer's Register, July 26, 1602.

may never be plucked out, nevertheless the approach to the play by that route may offer some interesting deductions.

As a study of the supernatural *Hamlet* is the logical sequel to *Julius Caesar*, but it states the problem so clearly and distinctly that it cannot be shuffled aside by any appeal to subjective mental states. In the first place the Ghost of Hamlet's father appears four times: twice to common soldiers of the watch, the third time to Horatio, a sceptical philosopher, and finally to Hamlet himself. The last is the only one of the group who has any of the characteristics of a ghost-seer. In the second place, the Ghost conveys to Hamlet information known only to one person on earth, the guilty Claudius, who esteemed his secret so closely locked within his breast that it could never be disclosed. It is true that Hamlet suspected his uncle's guilt, yet the grounds for his suspicions were so slight that, barring his mother's hasty marriage,³ he could find no justification for them:

O most wicked speed, to post
With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!
It is not, nor it cannot come to good:
But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue.
(I:2:156)

The news, however, that a specter appareled like his dead father had been seen, gave these suspicions yet more force:

My father's spirit in arms! all is not well;
I doubt some foul play: would the night were come!
Till then sit still, my soul: foul deed will rise,
Though all the earth o'erwhelm them, to men's eyes.
(I:2:255)

Nevertheless Hamlet's intuitions regarding his uncle do not invalidate the point that the ghost brought Hamlet information no one else knew, or could know, save the King.

³ *Hamlet*, I:2:137.

✓ Furthermore the apparition conforms in all respects to the traditional characteristics of a spirit or supernatural being. It appears at the witching hour of midnight, and vanishes at the approach of dawn; it cannot be injured by blows; and, as revealed by its speech to Hamlet, it has a powerful reason for its return to Elsinore, the quest for revenge:

Marcellus—

Horatio says 'tis but our fantasy,
And will not let belief take hold of him
Touching this dreaded sight, twice seen of us.
.

Bernardo—

Last night of all,
When yond same star that's westward from the pole
Had made his course to illumine that part of heaven
Where now it burns, Marcellus and myself,
The bell then beating one,—

(*Enter Ghost.*)

Marcellus—

Peace! break thee off; look, where it comes again!
.

Marcellus—

Thou art a scholar; speak to it, Horatio.
.

Horatio—

What art thou that usurp'st this time of night,
Together with that fair and warlike form
In which the majesty of buried Denmark
Did sometimes march? by heaven I charge thee speak.

Marcellus—

It is offended.
.

Bernardo—

How now, Horatio! you tremble and look pale:
Is not his something more than fantasy?
What think you on't?

Horatio—

Before my God, I might not this believe
Without the sensible and true avouch
Of mine own eyes. (I:1:23)

The Ghost disappears at the crowing of the cock; the dawn:

Bernardo—

It was about to speak when the cock crew.

Horatio—

And then it started like a guilty thing
Upon a fearful summons. I have heard
The cock, that is the trumpet to the morn,
Doth with his lofty and shrill-sounding throat
Awake the god of day; and at his warning,
Whether in sea or fire, in earth or air,
The extravagant and erring spirit hies
To his confine; and of the truth herein
The present object made probation.

Marcellus—

It faded on the crowing of the cock.
Some say that 'gainst that season comes
Wherein our Savior's birth is celebrated,
The bird of dawning singeth all night long;
And then, they say, no spirit dare stir abroad;
The nights are wholesome; then no planets strike,
No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm,
So hallow'd and so gracious is the time.

Horatio—

So I have heard and do in part believe it.

(I:1:148)

It was the medieval belief that those who met sudden death unblessed by the church, even though virtuous people, were forced to spend a period of purgatorial torment:

Hamlet—

He took my father grossly, full of bread,
With all his crimes broad-blown, as flush as May;
And how his audit stands who knows save heaven?
(III:3:80)

Ghost—

My hour is almost come
When I to sulphurous and tormenting flames
Must render up myself.

.

I am thy father's spirit;
 Doomed for a certain time to walk the night,
 And for the day confin'd to fast in fires,
 Until the foul crimes done in my days of nature
 Are burn't and purg'd away. But that I am forbid

I could a tale unfold whose lightest word
 Would harrow up thy soul. . . .

Hamlet—

O God!

Ghost—

Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.

Hamlet—

O my prophetic soul!

My uncle!

Ghost—

But, soft! methinks I scent the morning air;
 Brief let me be.

Thus was I, sleeping, by a brother's hand,
 Of life, of crown, of queen, at once dispatch'd;
 Cut off in the blossoms of my sin,
 Unhousel'd, disappointed, unanel'd,
 No reckoning made, but sent to my account
 With all my imperfections on my head.

(I:5:3)

That it is an incorporeal being, and not some person
 masquing as a spirit, is made clear by the passage:

Horatio—

Stop it, Marcellus.

Marcellus—

Shall I strike at it with my partisan?

Horatio—

Do, if it will not stand.

Bernardo—

'Tis here!

Horatio—

'Tis here! (*Exit Ghost.*)

Marcellus—

'Tis gone!

We do it wrong, being so majestic,
To offer it the show of violence;
For it is, as the air, invulnerable,
And all our vain blows malicious mockery.

Bernardo—

It was about to speak when the cock crew.

(I:1:139)

✓ } If these passages, therefore, be interpreted according to their manifest signification, they can only mean that the poet presents, here, as a character in a play, a visitant from the supernatural world; a spirit that has consciousness and self-direction, coming from a definite, but decidedly uncomfortable place, and with a distinct purpose in view. This purpose, furthermore, is ignoble; that of revenge. The crime of Claudius, so hideous in its conception and execution, tends to cause an ignoring of the fact that Hamlet's father as a living man had not been free from human sins. We know that he was courageous, but high-tempered:

So frown'd he once, when in an angry parle,
He smote the sledded Polacks on the ice.

(I:1:62)

✓ (He had "An eye like Mars to threaten or command";⁴ he was sent to his account unshriven, with all his imperfections on his head, guilty of "foul crimes done in my days of nature";⁵ and he returns from purgatorial flames to balance one crime by inciting the commission of another. It is not incredible that the poet believed God's laws to be as valid for the supernatural world as for the natural, and that the *lex talionis*, or law of blood revenge, was a substitution of a finite "kind of wild justice" for divine justice.

⁴ *Hamlet*, III:4:57.

⁵ *Hamlet*, III:3:80; I:5:10.

It was the universal belief of the medieval times that spirits or ethereal beings could rarely achieve results in the physical world by direct agency: the theory being that they acted mainly through the medium of some human being, whose peculiar physical or mental constitution rendered him subject to such supernatural solicitings. It is, in short, the phenomenon of mediumship or possession; a belief which goes back to the dawn of religions. In this connection, a contemporary opinion in Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (A digression of the nature of spirits) is illuminating. Speaking of the power of a spirit over an individual who is subject to supernatural influences, he says:

Many think he can worke upon the body but not upon the minde. But experience pronounceth otherwise, that he can worke both upon body and minde.⁶

Again in Le Loyer's *Treatise of Specters* (1605) the following passages are to be found:

There is not any of the corporall senses, but the divell may possesse the same, and use it at his pleasure, if God do permit him.⁷

The divell dooth cast himself also into the inward and interiour senses, and into the fantasie of men, and mooveth them in the same sorte as he doothe the externall: and by certayne extasie and alienation of their spirites which he causeth; he maketh diverse formes, specters, and phantosms to appear in their imaginations: the which at such times as they awake from sleepe, will so lively represent themselves to the externall senses, that a man cannot be otherwise perswaded, but that he hath truly and indeede seen them.⁸

Who are the ones most subject to supernatural influences? These authorities discuss this point at length, and both agree that melancholy may be favorable to the condition of possession:

⁶ Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, 3d ed., p. 49.

⁷ Le Loyer, *A Treatise of Specters*, p. 124 (verso). Cf. King James, *Daemonologie*. Glanvil, *Saducismus Triumphatus*, pt. 2.

⁸ Le Loyer, *A Treatise of Specters*, p. 124 (verso).

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This humour of Melancholy is called Balneum Diaboli, the Devils bath: the Divell spying his opportunity of such humours, drives them many times to despaire, fury, rage, etc., mingling himself amongst those humours.⁹

So, if the Divell doe once perceive that the braine is troubled or offended by any maladies or infirmities which are particularly incident thereunto: as the Epilepsie, or falling evil, Madnesse, Melancholy, Lunatique, fittes, and other such like passions: He presently taketh occasion to torment and trouble it the more.¹⁰

In seeking for an explanation for the many contradictions in the portrayal of the character of Hamlet, one of the first solutions in Shakespeare's day would have been possession. Modern criticism of the play, however, does not offer this as an explanation at all, so thoroughly has the attitude of thought changed since the time of Elizabeth and James.

In what way does the development of the character agree with this hypothesis? In the first place, what was Hamlet during his father's life? We know that he was a scholar and a student at the University of Wittenberg,¹¹ Luther's school; a center of genuine learning, not of riot like that of Paris.¹² From Ophelia's lips we learn of him as the world saw him:

Ophelia—

O! what a noble mind is here o'erthrown;
The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword;
The expectancy and rose of the fair state,
The glass of fashion and the mould of form,
The observ'd of all observers, quite, quite down!
And I, of ladies most deject and wretched,
That suck'd the honey of his music vows,
Now see that noble and most sovereign reason,
Like sweet bells jangled out of tune and harsh,
The unmatched'd form and feature of blown youth
Blasted with ecstasy. (III:1:158)

⁹ Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, 3d ed., p. 49.

¹⁰ Le Loyer, *A Treatise of Specters*, p. 132 (verso).

¹¹ *Hamlet*, I:2:164; I:2:112.

¹² Villon, *Oeuvres*. Introduction by Longnon. (Paris, 1892). Laurie, *Rise and Constitution of the Universities*. (N. Y., 1891).

The crude psychology of Shakespeare's age divided people into different dispositions, or "humours," and it was not unusual for writers to give representations of certain of these "humours" in characters. That Jonson did this we know, as does Shakespeare, very clearly, in *As You Like It*. In this play we discover the affectation of "humours" in Jacques, and the man genuinely so afflicted in the usurping Duke Frederick. One of these, indeed, according to Burton and other contemporary writers, the source of nearly all the destructive "humours" is melancholy. The story of Burton's own life and work is, furthermore, a most illuminating commentary on the character of Hamlet. It is evident that back of the glister and amazing creative activity of the Renaissance brooded a depth of seriousness, world-weariness and fear of the unknown that we can never fathom; glimpses of which, however, have been given us in Dürer's engraving, *Melencolia*, and the numerous examples of the Danse Macabre.

Hamlet is afflicted by melancholy; he says so, and the others say so:

King—

How is it that the clouds still hang on you?

Hamlet—

'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,
Nor customary suits of solemn black,
Nor windy suspiration of forc'd breath,
No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,

That can denote me truly; these indeed seem,
For they are actions that a man might play;
But I have that within which passeth show;
These but the trappings and the suits of woe.

(I:2:67)

The King says to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern when he sets them to spy on Hamlet:

King—

The need we have to use you did provoke
Our hasty sending. Something have you heard

Of Hamlet's transformation; so I call it,
 Sith nor the exterior nor the inward man
 Resembles that it was. What it should be
 More than his father's death, that thus hath put him
 So much from the understanding of himself,
 I cannot dream of. (II:2:3)

Hamlet intuitively perceives the mission of these spies, yet to them he unfolds still more concerning the state of his mind, letting no hint fall, however, regarding the Ghost:

Hamlet—

What have you, my good friends, deserved at the hands of Fortune, that she sends you to prison hither?

Guiltenstern—

Prison, my lord!

Hamlet—

Denmark's a prison.

Rosencrantz—

Then is the world one.

Hamlet—

A goodly one; in which there are many confines, wards, and dungeons, Denmark being one o' the worst.

Rosencrantz—

We think not so, my lord.

Hamlet—

Why, then, 'tis none to you; for there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so; to me it is a prison.

Further he says:

Hamlet—

I have of late, but wherefore I know not,—lost all my mirth, foregone all custom of exercises; and indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to be a sterile promontory; this most excellent canopy, the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire, why, it appears no other to me but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours: What a piece of work is man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form, in moving, how express and admirable! in action how like

an angel! in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is the quintessence of dust? Man delights not me; no, nor woman neither.

(II:2:245)

Life has grown so distasteful to him that he has constant incitements to suicide:

Hamlet—

O! that this too, too solid flesh would melt,
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew!
Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God! God!
How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable
Seems to me all the uses of this world.
Fie on't! Ah fie! 'tis an unweeded garden,
That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely.

(I:2:129)

Polonius—

My honourable lord, I will most humbly take leave of you.

Hamlet—

You cannot, sir, take from me anything that I will more willingly part withal; except my life, except my life.

(II:2:217)

As has been suggested, comparison of *Hamlet* with its sources reveals that the important modifications Shakespeare has made are the introduction of the Ghost, and the peculiar disposition of his hero. The differences between Belleforest's translation of Bandello's tale and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* are so remarkable that they cannot be explained by any theory save that of direct intention on the part of the poet. That he could follow his sources slavishly is well known; in fact, as in the case of Plutarch, when he found the material in acceptable dramatic form he did not deem it necessary to make extensive modifications in the narrative. When such modifications, however, are made, a definite dramatic purpose underlies such changes. Belleforest's *Hamlet* is a typical character of a bloodthirsty age, who feigns madness to keep from being sent to join

his father in the land of shades. He knows, as does his mother, that his uncle murdered his father; he avenges his father's death in a direct and bloody manner; and in the end comes back from England with two wives. The only passage in Belleforest that refers to the supernatural is, nevertheless, very significant:

Hamlet, while his father lived had been instructed in that devilish art, whereby the wicked spirite abuseth man-kind, and advertiseth him (as he can) of things past. It toucheth not the matter herein to discover the part of devination in man, and whether this prince by reason of his over great melancholy, had received those impressions, devining that, which never any but himself had before declared, like the Philosophers, who discoursing of divers deep points of philosophie, attribute the force of those devinations to such as are Saturnists by complexion who, oftentimes speake of things which their fury ceasing, they then alreadye can hardly understand who are the pronouncers, and for that cause Plato saith, many diviners and many poets, after the force and vigour of their fier beginneth to lessen, do hardly understand what they have written, although intreating of such things, while the spirite of devination continueth upon them, they doe in such sort discourse thereof that the authors and the inventers of the arts themselves by them alledged commend their discourses and subtile disputations. Likewise I mean not to relate that which divers men beleieve that a reasonable soul, becommeth the habitation of a meaner sort or divels, by whom men learn the secrets of things natural.¹⁸

These crude hints of the supernatural, contained in the sources of *Hamlet*, could not be portrayed upon the stage successfully, without great modification. Shakespeare's problem was therefore either to eliminate them entirely, or to deepen them, as he did in *Julius Caesar*, rendering them more concrete and objective. It was his intention, however, to concern himself "with thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls," and he could do this only by strengthening the element of the supernatural, and this end is attained by the introduction of the Ghost. Accepting this

¹⁸ Hazlitt, *Shakespeare's Library*, vol. 2, *Historie of Hamlet*, p. 249.

view, how does the development of both the play and of the character conform to it?

In the first place it absolutely destroys the theory that Hamlet was insane. His mind, indeed, was "not tainted" or organically diseased, yet it was subject to strange exaltations, despondencies, intuitions, and rashnesses that were assumed to be characteristic of people under supernatural spell or domination. Consider Hamlet mad, and the whole moral idea of the play is lost with his loss of self-direction, and the production, as a whole, becomes the quintessence of irrationality. We have, therefore the portrayal of the struggle of two wills: that of Hamlet himself, and that of the Ghost which is continually exerted upon him; not to speak of Hamlet's objective collision with a social order with which he had few affiliations.

When Hamlet is met by Horatio, who is coming to inform him of the appearance of the apparition, he gives the latter a start by suddenly exclaiming:

Hamlet—

My father, methinks I see my father. ✓

Horatio—

O! where, my lord? ✓

Hamlet—

In my mind's eye, Horatio. ✓

(I:2:184)

In this way it would seem that the poet means to suggest that the influence of his father's spirit was already being exerted upon Hamlet's spiritual senses, which is further corroborated by the passage at the end of the same scene:

Hamlet—

My father's spirit in arms! all is not well:
I doubt some foul play: would the night were come!
Till then sit still, my soul: foul deeds will rise,
Though all the earth o'erwhelm them, to men's eyes.

(I:2:25)

Also by Hamlet's speech after the Ghost's revelations:

Ghost—

The serpent that did sting thy father's life now wears his crown.

Hamlet—

O my prophetic soul!

My uncle!

(I:5:38)

Hamlet cross-questioned Horatio and the soldiers, and discovered that they were telling the truth, after which he exacted a promise that they would not speak of their experience, saying:

If it assume my noble father's person

I'll speak to it, though hell itself should gape

And bid me hold my peace.

(I:2:244)

When Hamlet encounters the Ghost it refuses to speak, or cannot, until he is apart from the others, and they attempt to dissuade him from following it:

Marcellus—

Do not go with it.

Horatio—

No, by no means.

Hamlet—

It will not speak; then will I follow it.

Horatio—

Do not, my lord.

Hamlet—

Why, what should be the fear?

I do not set my life at a pin's fee;

And for my soul, what can it do to that,

Being a thing immortal as itself?

It waves me forth again; I'll follow it.

Horatio—

What if it tempt you toward the flood, my lord,

Or to the dreadful summit of the cliff

That beetles o'er his base into the sea,

And there assume some other horrible form,

Which might deprive your sovereignty of reason,

And draw you into madness? . . .

.

Hamlet—

It waves me still.

Go on, I'll follow thee.

Marcellus—

You shall not go, my lord.

Hamlet—

Hold off your hands!

Horatio—

Be rul'd; you shall not go.

Hamlet—

My fate cries out,
And makes each petty artery in this body
As hardy as the Nemean lion's nerves.

(Ghost beckons.)

Still am I call'd. Unhand me, gentlemen,

(Breaking from them.)

By heaven! I'll make a ghost of him that lets me:
I say, away! Go on, I'll follow thee.

(Exeunt Ghost and Hamlet.)

Horatio—

He waxes desperate with imagination.

Marcellus—

Let's follow; 'tis not fit thus to obey him.

(I:4:62)

After his interview with the Ghost Hamlet shows all the symptoms of madness, speaking "wild and whirling words," but finally calms down enough to make his companions swear a solemn, threefold oath, in which the Ghost takes part, invisible, but audible. Hamlet knows, too, that henceforth he is a changed man, and for fear lest they may reveal the cause of his actions, he warns them:

Hamlet—

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.

But come;

Here, as before, never, so help you mercy,
How strange or odd soe'er I bear myself,
As I perchance hereafter shall think meet
To put an antic disposition on,

That you at such times, seeing me, never shall,
With arms encumber'd thus, or this head shake,

Or such ambiguous giving out, to note
That you know aught of me; this not to do,
So grace and mercy at your most need help you,
Swear.

Ghost (beneath)— Swear. (They swear.)

Hamlet—

Rest, rest perturbed spirit. (I:5:166)

There seems to be no escape from the inference that Shakespeare was endeavoring to portray a ghost-seer, or, in modern terms, a spiritualistic medium, in Hamlet. Throughout the play the characterization is consistent with this interpretation. Thus we find at the very beginning, the melancholy, or negative state, that is said to induce such a condition; clairvoyance; clairaudience; and those strange alterations of mental aberration and sanity that have been the immemorial marks of the psychic.

How does this hypothesis agree with Hamlet's strange moods; his times of inaction and lethargy, and his bursts of violent activity that overleap themselves? In the first place, the influence of the Ghost upon his personality is not always direct, for during the day he is "confin'd to fast in fires." It is noteworthy therefore that the only time it reappears in the play is at midnight, when Hamlet at the interview with his mother so forgets himself in his words to her that he breaks the promise to leave her "to heaven and to those thorns that in her bosom lodge."

Hamlet—

'Tis now the very witching time of night,
When churchyards yawn, and hell itself breathes out
Contagion to this world: now could I drink hot blood,
And do such bitter business as the day
Would quake to look on. Soft! now to my mother,
O heart! lose not thy nature; let not ever
The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom;

Let me be cruel but not unnatural;
 I will speak daggers to her, but use none.
 My tongue and soul in this be hypocrites;
 Now in my words soever she be shent,
 To give them seals never, my soul consent!

(III:2:406)

He thus perceives the danger lest he work himself into a frenzy and do his mother harm, which indeed was the very thing that threatened when the Ghost made himself visible.

(Enter Ghost.)

Hamlet—

Save me, and hover o'er me with your wings,
 You heavenly guards! What would your gracious figure?

Queen—

Alas! he's mad!

(III:4:103)

The Queen could not see the Ghost, either because her nature was too material to sense such visitations, or because the Ghost did not choose to reveal himself to her (which power, it was held, they possessed) hence she assumed that her son had suddenly become insane. He hastens to assure her he is not, asks her to test him, and finally exclaims:

Mother, for love of grace,
 Lay not that flattering unction to your soul,
 That not your trespass, but my madness speaks.

(III:4:144)

Nevertheless, whether the spirit of Hamlet's father was with him unceasingly, the influence or spell was never away, and apparently he acquired abnormal psychic or intuitional powers. He perceives the plots of the King against him; informs Rosencrantz and Guildenstern of the secret purpose of their mission; tells his mother that he is to be sent to England, before he has been notified of the fact; and when the announcement is made expresses no astonishment:

King—

Hamlet, this deed for thine especial safety
Which we do tender, as we dearly grieve
For that for which thou hast done, must send thee hence
With fiery quickness: therefore prepare thyself;
The bark is ready, and the wind at help,
The associates tend, and everything is bent
For England.

Hamlet—

For England.

King—

Ay, Hamlet

Hamlet—

Good.

King—

So is it, if thou knew'st our purposes.

Hamlet—

I see a cherub that sees them.

(IV:3:42)

Hamlet—

Sir, in my heart there was a kind of fighting,
That would not let me sleep: methought I lay
Worse than the mutines in the bilboes. Rashly,
And praised be rashness for it, let us know,
Our indiscretion sometimes serves us well,
When our deep plots do pall: and that should teach us
There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will.

(V:2:4)

From the moment of his interview with the Ghost there was no question in his mind of its reality, yet there was another question that must be settled: was the spirit an evil or a good one?

Hamlet—

The spirit that I have seen
May be the devil: and the devil hath power
To assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps
Out of my weakness and melancholy
As he is very potent with such spirits
Abuses me to damn me. I'll have grounds
More relative than this: the play's the thing
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King.

(II:2:627)

Hamlet—

I have heard,
That guilty creatures sitting at a play
Have by the very cunning of the scene
Been struck so to the soul that presently
They have proclaim'd their malefactions;
For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak
With most miraculous organ. I'll have these players,
Play something of the murder of my father
Before mine uncle: I'll observe his looks;
I'll tent him to the quick; if he but blench,
I'll know my course. (II:2:618)

It is therefore for two purposes that the poet introduces the episode of the players (a thing utterly foreign to the original sources of the play): to force the King to self-revelation of his crime, and at the same time to prove that the Ghost was not a lying spirit. Hamlet fears lest his suspicions and all of the strange occurrences may be but monstrous errors, based upon no more solid foundation than the wicked speed shown by his mother in posting to incestuous sheets. He tells Horatio, therefore, to watch the King during the play, explaining:

If his occulted guilt
Do not itself unkennel in one speech,
It is a damned ghost that we have seen,
And my imaginations are as foul
As Vulcan's stithy. (III:2:88)

The result, however, was just what he anticipated, the King reveals his guilt, and is thrown into a state of panic and remorse;¹⁴ and Hamlet becomes hysterical, again full of "wild and whirling words":

Hamlet—

For thou dost know, O Damon dear,
This realm dismantled was
Of Jove, himself; and now reigns here
A very, very—pajock.

¹⁴ *Hamlet*, III:3:36.

Horatio—

You might have rimed.

Hamlet—

O good Horatio! I'll take the ghost's word
For a thousand pound. Didst perceive?

Horatio—

Very well, my lord.

Hamlet—

Upon the talk of the poisoning?

Horatio—

I did very well note him.

Hamlet—

Ah, ha! Come some music! come the recorders!
For if the King likes not the comedy,
Why then, belike he likes it not, perdy.

(III:2:292)

It is not within the province of this discussion to follow all of the implications of this theory of *Hamlet*. It should be pointed out, however, that Hamlet was unfitted by temperament and training for the task thus supernaturally thrust upon him. It is reasonable to assume that a man who was disgusted with the swinish habits¹⁵ of the court and the people in general, would have been disinclined to play private executioner in a blood feud, however much he or his had been wronged. His high ethical standards, his philosophy, his love for the beautiful in art, music, the drama, and life itself, all rebelled against this unceasing pressure upon his soul exerted by a being in the world of shades. Thus results that flux of activity and inactivity that makes up the play of *Hamlet*. And in the end, all of his plans for revenge come to naught; for accident, chance, or the working of some higher law, interfered, and precipitated the final catastrophe, in which the King, the Queen, Laertes and Hamlet are swept to the beyond in a carnival of death. It is only by Hamlet's dying hand that Horatio is prevented from sharing their fate, Hamlet imploring him to "absent him from felicity awhile," and the reason:

¹⁵ *Hamlet*, I:4:13.

O good Horatio, what a wounded name,
 Things standing thus unknown shall live behind me!
 If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,
 Absent thee from felicity awhile,
 And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,
 To tell my story. (V:2:355)

Now the story Horatio could tell was that of the Ghost and its revelation of the guilt of the King. Both *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* are tracts illustrative of the dangers of subjecting one's soul to the control of the spirits of the vasty deep, and the theme of the former is, after all, "Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord."

III

MACBETH

When the plays of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* are compared, an interesting distinction is observed in the use of the supernatural. In the former we find the hero powerfully acted upon by metaphysical influences, yet mainly against his own will and personal tendencies. The play in its deepest sense, is the picture of a soul torn by dual tendencies: the good being his own natural nobility; the evil the incitements of the Ghost to revenge and murder. Hamlet, himself, seems to have foreseen what was in store for him when he said:

The time is out of joint; O cursed spite,
That ever I was born to set it right.

(*Hamlet*, I:4:189)

In *Macbeth*, however, we find the hero, after a few hesitations and struggles with his better self, welcoming supernatural evil represented in the form of the Weird Sisters. Macbeth like Hamlet is a ghost-seer. He becomes entranced at the words of the witches (*Banquo*—"Look, how our partner's rapt");¹ he is highly imaginative and indulges in extravagant flights of poetic rhapsody; he has hallucinations of "air-drawn daggers"; and he can see the specter of murdered Banquo. Furthermore, in the case of Macbeth, there is another distinction, and one that has an important bearing upon the development of the play as a whole. This is the fact that there was something in Macbeth's soul that linked him with the powers of evil before they prophesied to him. This is not stressed, yet it is there, and a careful reading will reveal it.

¹ *Macbeth*, I:3:142.

One of the means by which this link is indicated is by the words on Macbeth's lips as he first appears upon the scene:

So foul and fair a day I have not seen. (I:3:38)

These are but an echo of the rune of the witches in the first scene:

Fair is foul, and foul is fair.
Hover through the fog and filthy air.

Thus early in the play is its dominant note sounded, which rings throughout the whole action—a veritable *leit motiv* of doom:

Banquo—
Good sir, why do you start, and seem to fear
Things that do sound so fair?
. (I:3:51)

Banquo—
But 'tis strange:
And oftimes to win us to our harm,
The instruments of darkness tell us truths,
Win us with honest trifles to betray's
In deepest consequence.
. (I:3:122)

Macbeth—
(*Aside.*) Come what come may
Time and hour runs through the roughest day.
. (I:3:146)

Duncan—
There's no art
To find the mind's construction in the face.
. (I:4:11)

Lady Macbeth—
Look like the innocent flower,
But be the serpent under't.
. (I:5:66)

Macbeth—
Away, and mock the time with fairest show:
False face must hide what false heart doth know.
. (I:7:81)

To understand the deeper implications of *Macbeth*, it is necessary to refer to the sources of the play in order to determine just what modifications have been made by the playwright. The original story of Macbeth was narrated by Hector Boece in his *Scotorum Historiae* (1526), whose account Holinshed used in his *Chronicles of England and Scotland* (1587)—the treasure-house of the Elizabethan dramatists. Macbeth, according to Holinshed, was a cousin of the King and had an equal title to the throne: both Duncan and he being grandsons of King Malcolm's sister, Beatrice. The crown, however, was given to "soft and gentle" Duncan, being denied to Macbeth who was brave, but cruel. Although the Weird Sisters are found in the source of the play they have few of the characteristics of Macbeth's witches; nor is Hecate, the queen of hell, introduced. The character of Banquo, likewise undergoes a radical modification, whereas in Holinshed he is portrayed as an accessory of Macbeth in the murder of Duncan, in the play he refuses to act upon the incitements of the witches. The appearance of Banquo's ghost, and the supernaturalism found in the fourth act are wholly foreign to the original source of the tragedy.

The question arises, why these changes? We know that the poet, as in the case of Plutarch's Caesar, when he saw fit, could adhere almost slavishly to the text. Furthermore, a study of the use of his sources reveals that he usually had a definite purpose in view when he made any change.

The first impression we receive of Macbeth is that of a hero and the savior of a state fallen into disunion under the rule of a good but weak king. Nevertheless the day of success, fair though it appear for Macbeth, carries in its bosom the hour of fatal choice for the victor. The moment of triumph, one would therefore infer, is more dangerous than that of defeat, for there are standing in the pathway of each man in the hour of success, evil fates beckoning him to destruction, granting of course that there is some taint, defect or subtle bond that unites him with the powers of evil.

Although it is not stressed, in the play, the existence of such defect is clearly indicated. Macbeth's first words, as has been suggested, echo those of the witch. When the prophecies are spoken, Macbeth's start, his momentary trance-like condition, and finally his own soliloquy, reveal how fertile is the soil into which fall the words of the witches. He is theirs already, and they know it. The poet has carefully avoided, in the first scenes of the play, stressing the defect of cruelty which had caused the historical Macbeth to lose the crown, yet he did not wholly eliminate it. His artistic dilemma, of course, was to create a certain sympathy with the protagonist, and yet to prevent the play from being a treatise in fatalism, which would have been the case had Macbeth been merely a good man led astray by supernatural solicitations. There is a bond that connects Macbeth with the "lower-half-world," and the poet reveals its gradual strengthening, until it is beyond his power to break.

Shakespeare, with exception perhaps of Iago, has never created a total villain; a fiend in human form. Even Edmund, the bastard in *Lear*, repented his wickedness at the last, but not Iago, who meets his death with the words "Demand me nothing: what you know, you know." In life, as the poet perceived, men and women contain in their hearts the seeds of good and evil; either of which may be nourished and brought to flowering by the individual himself. Of the possibilities of evil he may be totally unconscious until the hour of temptation comes. In view of this fact, how luminous with respect to Macbeth, therefore, are words of Hamlet:

So, oft it chances in particular men,
 For some vicious mole of nature in them,
 As, in their birth,—wherein they are not guilty,
 Since nature cannot choose its origin,—
 By the o'ergrowth of some complexion,
 Oft breaking down the pales and forts of reason,
 Or by some habit that too much o'er-leavens
 The form of plausive manners; that these men,

Carrying, I say, the stamp of one defect,
 Being nature's livery, or fortune's star,—
 Their virtues else,—be they pure as grace,
 As infinite as man may undergo,—
 Shall in the general censure take corruption
 From that particular fault.

(*Hamlet*, I:4:23)

This is the poet's commentary on the character of Macbeth, and in the development of the drama he reveals the forces that bring one type of such individuals to a tragic end.

The problems of the whole play of *Macbeth* center in the Weird Sisters, and Macbeth's relation to them. In the first place there are great differences between the Norn-like creatures of Boece and Holinshed, and the witches of Macbeth. In the original sources they are called "feiries or weird sisters,"² and these have none of the disgusting or abnormal attributes of the witches in *Macbeth*. Externally the latter are merely the witch-hags of the country side traditions. They are not only "wild in attire," but "wither'd" as well,³ with "skinny lips and bearded chins," suggestive of sexlessness. They have familiar spirits in Graymalkin, the cat, Paddock, the frog, and Harpier, the dog. The first scene of the fourth act is a portrayal of a 'Witches' Sabbath with its foul orgies, its brewing of hell-broth, and its loathsome incantations:

1st Witch—

Thrice the brinded cat hath mew'd.

2d Witch—

Thrice and once the hedg-pig whined.

3d Witch—

Harpier cries 'Tis time, 'tis time!

² "There met them three women in strange and wild apparell, resembling creatures of elder world. Goddesses of destinie, or else some nymphs or feiries."—Holinshed's *Chronicle of Scotland*. (1577).

³ *Macbeth*, I:3:40.

1st Witch—

Round about the cauldron go:
 In the poison'd entrails throw
 Toad that under cold stone
 Days and nights has thirty-one
 Swelter'd venom sleeping got

.
 Fillet of a fenny snake

.
 Eye of newt and toe of frog,
 Wool of bat and tongue of dog,
 Adder's fork and blind-worm's sting,
 Lizard's leg and howlet's wing.

.
 Witche's mummy, maw and gulf
 Of the ravin'd salt-sea shark,
 Root of hemlock digg'd i' the dark,
 Liver of blaspheming Jew,
 Gall of goat and slips of yew

.
 Nose of Turk and Tartar's lips,
 Finger of new-strangled babe
 Ditch-deliver'd by a drab,
 Make the gruel think and slab:
 Add thereto a tiger's chaudron,
 For the ingredients of our cauldron.

All—

Double, double toil and trouble
 Fire burn and cauldron bubble.

(IV:1:1)

In the first act (Scene 3) the petty maliciousness of the traditional witch is indicated.⁴ One has been killing a farmer's swine; another:

A sailor's wife had chestnuts in her lap,
 And mounch'd and mounch'd, and mounch'd.
 'Give me,' quoth I:
 'Aroint thee, witch!' the rump-fed ronyon cries.
 Her husband's to Aleppo gone, master o' the Tiger:

⁴Lathbury, *A detection of damnable drifts practised by three witches*, etc. (1579).

But in a sieve I'll thither sail,
And like a rat without a tail,
I'll do, I'll do, and I'll do.

(I:3:4)

They are thus portrayed as things of evil, but of petty evil, anything rather than nymphs or goddesses of destiny. Their element is the hurly-burly, the thunder, lightning and other destructive forces of nature, and over these they have some power which they use to injure those who have incurred their hatred. King James, himself, ascribed his tempestuous voyage from Denmark with his bride, Princess Anne, to witches, and personally presided at the trial and torture of a number of unfortunate men and women who were accused of raising these storms by devilish practices.⁵

This power is alluded to when the first witch says:

1st Witch—

I'll give thee a wind.

2d Witch—

Thou art kind.

3d Witch—

And I another.

1st Witch—

And I have all the other;
And the very ports they blow,
All the quarters that they know
I' the Shipman's card

Though his bark cannot be lost,
Yet it shall be tempest tost.

(I:3:11)

They are "posters of the sea and land" and travel with incredible swiftness on their abominable missions; they can sail the seas in sieves; can change their shapes at will into tailless rats or other foul creatures; cause men and women to pine away by their spells; and can vanish like bubbles into the air.⁶

⁵ *News from Scotland: Declaring the damnable life of Dr. Pian.*

⁶ *Macbeth*, I:3:79. Cf. King James, *Daemonologie*.

There are traces, however, of the Norns in the Witches of *Macbeth*. They are three in number, like the Fates; the first voices the past ("Hail to thee, thane of Glamis!"); the second, the present (~~"Hail to thee, thane of Glamis!"~~); and the third, the future ("Thou shalt be King hereafter!"). Furthermore, that they are divinities of evil is shown by the introduction of Hecate, the Queen of Hell, to whom they apparently act as aides, and are reprimanded when they endeavor to mislead men without consulting her.⁷

The introduction of the character of Hecate has been criticized by many students of Shakespeare, and by some ascribed to other hands than those of the creator of the play,⁸ yet if his conception of Hecate, as revealed by allusions in various plays,⁹ be considered there can hardly be any question but that the character was introduced by Shakespeare and plays a necessary part in the drama. If the witches, themselves, as the descendants from the Norns of Teutonic myth have a distinguished lineage, the Hecate of medieval demonology has a still nobler ancestry. At first as great Diana (Artemis), she was the Moon-queen of the heavens; then as Demeter or Ceres, she was the goddess of fecundation and growth. Now as growth, or life, also has its complement or corollary of death, Demeter had her negative phase as developed in the mythus of Persephone, who, for the half-year (winter or death) becomes the queen of the realm of Pluto or Dis. Hence the medieval iconoclasts, who transmuted all the pagan deities into devils, perceiving that Hecate was already, in some of her aspects, the feminine expression of the mysteries of night, of winter and of death, made her therefore the complement of Satan, and the queen of all things dark and evil. These composite elements tended to make her the patron deity of witchcraft and all occult and secret practices of the night.

⁷ *Macbeth*, IV:1.

⁸ Fleay, *Witch Scenes in Macbeth* (N. S. Soc. Trans.); Spaulding, *Witch Scenes in Macbeth* (N. S. Soc. Trans.); Farnell, L. R., *Cults of the Greek States*, vol. 2; St. Clair, G., *Myths of Greece*, vol. 1.

⁹ *Mid-Summer Night's Dream*, V:1:390; *Hamlet*, III:2:269; *Lear*, I:1:112; *Macbeth*, II:2:51.

Now, if we follow carefully the construction of the witch episodes in the play, the relation Macbeth bears to the supernatural world of evil becomes clear. Here lies the nexus of the problems presented, and as in the case of the Ghost in *Hamlet*, the point of view of the reader regarding the witches will absolutely change his conception of Macbeth's character. If they are conceived as projections, merely, of Macbeth's soul—pictures, as it were of that inner self, hidden at first, but afterwards revealed—then we are concerned with the downfall of a man whose ambition led him in gaining his ends to choose the quicker method of crime. Viewed in this way, the supernatural becomes little short of a defect in the play, and the question of Macbeth's moral freedom and responsibility assumes the predominance. Such an interpretation explains Macbeth, the tyrant, against whom all wholesome social order is arrayed, but it does not explain Macbeth, the symbol of all men who are tempted and fall. And this, it seems, is just the question that the poet is endeavoring to solve. Does sin, he asks, have its origin wholly within the human soul; wholly without; or is it the result of an interaction of both the physical and the metaphysical worlds of evil.

The whole problem of the play therefore turns on the essential reality of the world of which Hecate and the witches are the representatives. That the people believed in this world we know, and in the play we discover its representatives actively engaged in inciting men to crime. As in the case of the Ghost in *Hamlet*, the dramatist has taken every precaution to present the witches as objective realities; they are revealed in four scenes, separated wholly from normal human beings. Banquo is amazed at them, and Macbeth, himself, asks them what they are. With their speech, however, he learns, becoming immediately aware that his inward thought, whose "murder yet is fantastical" had found an echo where he least expected it. The witches did not tell him to commit murder; all that was necessary was for them to suggest the fact of the

crown, and they could trust Macbeth to overcome the obstacles in his way just as they would have him. The element of moral courage lacking in his nature, the absence of which prevented his taking the first step in crime, was supplied by his wife.

Macbeth—

If we should fail?

Lady Macbeth—

We fail!

But screw your courage to the sticking-place,

And we'll not fail.

(I:7:59)

The unfolding of the characters of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth under the suggested temptation is a most striking evidence of Shakespeare's psychological insight. With all of her ambition and her astonishing power of will, Lady Macbeth is nevertheless a woman, and woman-like she has the power to rise, in order to meet a crisis, to a sublime height, even though it be a height of evil. Nevertheless she lacks the ability to preserve that altitude. As long as her husband shares his plans with her, she aids and protects him; but once he withdraws his confidence, she becomes the victim of a melancholy and remorse that end in suicide. Her dreadful secret, which she thinks is securely locked up in her heart, is revealed to the world in her sleep, and she, who had asserted that "a little water clears us of this deed," and that "the sleeping and the dead are but as pictures," wandered lonely in the night, with words on her lips that reveal a soul on fire:

Lady Macbeth—

What need we fear who knows it, when none can call
our power to account? Yet who would have thought the
old man to have had so much blood in him?

(V:1:41)

Here's the smell of blood still: all the perfumes of
Arabia will not sweeten this little hand.

(V:1:59)

Shakespeare has given us, in the portrayal of the inner lives of Macbeth and his wife, a vision of two souls in torment, due in Macbeth's case to fears of the future, and that of Lady Macbeth to remorse for the past. Lady Macbeth lived and sinned for her husband's sake, and when he forsook her there was nothing for her to live for, and death was the only solution to her problem. "She should have died hereafter," and "all our yesterdays have lighted fools the way to dusty death" was her requiem, spoken by the one for whom she had made this sacrifice.

Macbeth, on the contrary, reacts but slowly to the inciting cause. He enters upon his career of crime with hesitation and foreboding, yet with each misdeed he becomes more hardened until at last we hear him saying:

For mine own good
All causes shall give way: I am in blood
Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more,
Returning were as tedious as go o'er.

(III:4:134)

His irresolution, however, is due to ignoble causes; the things that he fears are nothing more than popular censure and loss of reputation:

We will proceed no further in this business:
He hath honour'd me of late; and I have bought
Golden opinions from all sorts of people.

(I:7:31)

But in these cases

We still have judgment here; that we but teach
Bloody instruction, which being taught, return
To plague the inventor: this even-handed justice
Commends the ingredients of our poison'd chalice
To our own lips.

(I:7:7)

It is noteworthy that nowhere does Macbeth ascribe his crimes to the Weird Sisters. Nor does he appear to recognize the fact that he himself has caused the prophecy to come true; or that he contained in himself both the prophecy and its fulfillment. Being therefore responsible he cannot

3d Witch—

A drum, a drum! Macbeth doth come!

(I:3:30)

1st Witch—

Why, how now, Hecate! you look angrily.

Hecate—

Have I not reason, beldames as you are,
Saucy and overbold? How did you dare
To trade and traffic with Macbeth
In riddles and affairs of death?

Upon the corner of the moon
There hangs a vaporous drop profound;
And that distill'd by magic sleights
Shall raise such artificial sprites
As by the strength of their illusion
Shall draw him on to his confusion:
He shall spurn fate, scorn death, and bear
His hopes 'bove wisdom, grace and fear:
And you know security
Is mortal's chiefest enemy.

(III:5:1)

It is manifest, therefore, that *Macbeth* in its deepest sense is a portrayal of the interaction of the natural and the supernatural worlds of evil. The latter is shown to be actively at work endeavoring to influence men to become a part of itself, yet the statement is equally clear that it is potent over none save those who seek it, or who make it their good.¹⁰ *Macbeth's* hidden self was subtly allied with that spiritual cosmos of which the witches were the materialization, and the whole play from the prophetic utterances to the final catastrophe is but the revelation of the disintegration of a human soul. His original blight, a tiny infection in one otherwise noble, stimulated into activity by fair words from foul lips, and by the prompt-

¹⁰ "Webster acknowledges 'an internal mental and spiritual League or Covenant betwixt the Devil and all wicked persons . . . this spiritual League in some respects and in some persons may be, and is an explicit League, that is the persons that enter into it, are or may be conscious of it.'" Kittredge, G. L., *Notes on Witchcraft*, 1677. (American Antiquarian Soc. Proceedings, vol. 18, pp. 148-212.)

ings of his wife, slowly spreads throughout his whole nature, until it becomes visible to the world in his amazing crimes. He hardly understands himself the reason why the things for which he has made such sacrifices should yield him so little joy.

Seyton! I am sick at heart,
When I behold—Seyton, I say—This push
Will cheer me even, or disseat me now.
I have lived long enough: my way of life
Is fall'n into the sear, the yellow leaf;
And that which should accompany old age,
As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have; but, in their stead,
Curses, not loud but deep, mouth-honour, breath
Which the poor heart would fain deny, and dare not.
(V:3:19)

No wonder he says of the witches:

Infected be the air whereon they ride,
And damn'd all those that trust them. (IV:1:138)

Macbeth, furthermore, did not stand alone. He was the first man in the state; at the beginning a leader, at the end a king. Had it been otherwise, the effects of his fall would have been less disastrous. As leader and king, however, his responsibility was increased, for, in a sense, he was the source of law. His deeds, however, were destructive of law, hence he corrupted his office and instilled his contagion into the body politic.

Macbeth—

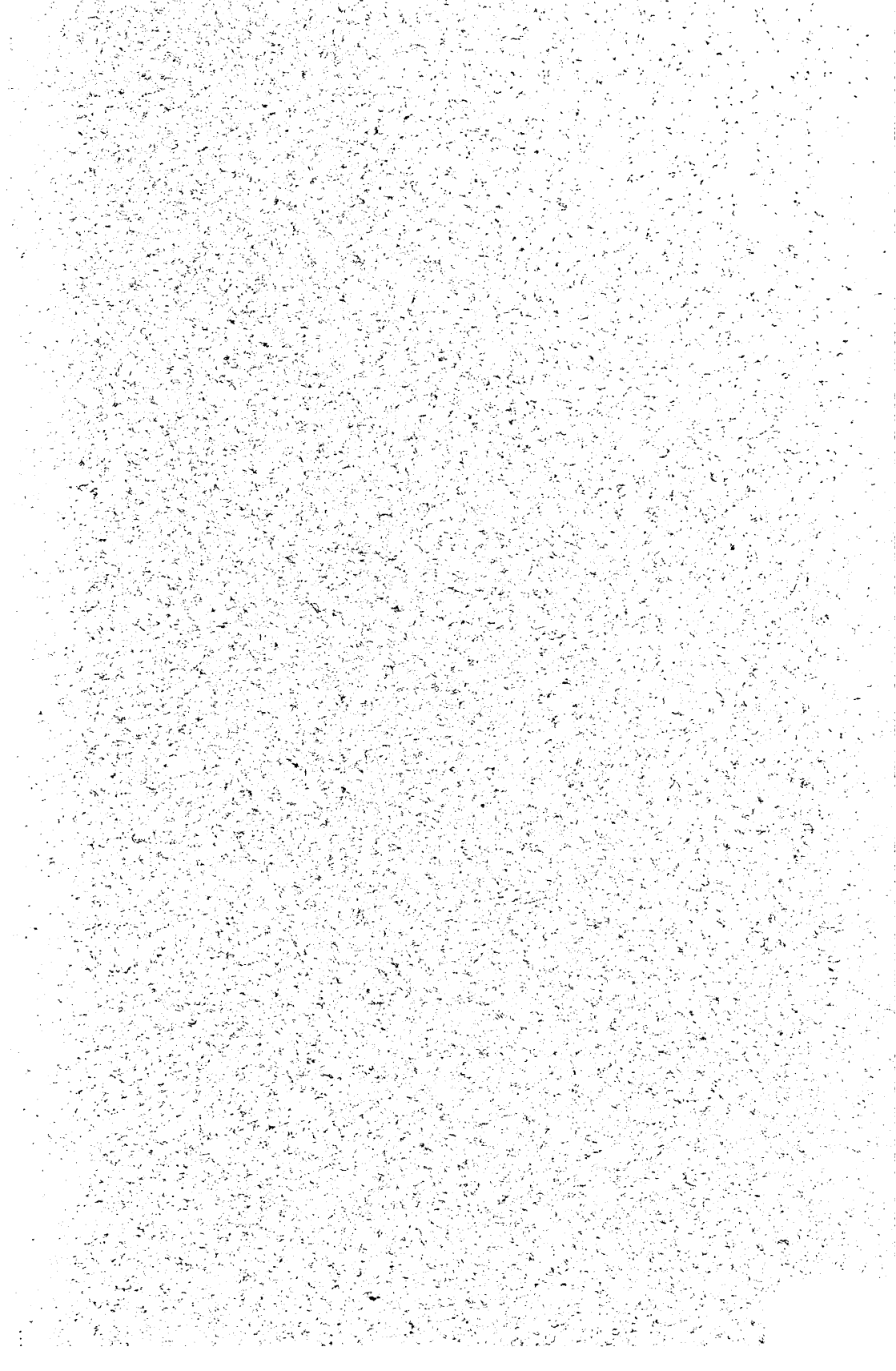
Doctor, the thanes fly from me.
Come, sir, dispatch. If thou couldst, doctor, cast
The water of my land, to find her disease
And purge it to a sound and pristine health,
I would applaud thee to the very echo,
That should applaud again. (V:3:48)

In view of these facts, it seems clear, therefore, that the poet carries the use of the supernatural in *Macbeth* a degree beyond its portrayal in *Julius Caesar* and *Hamlet*. He rendered the play more intelligible and popular to his

own audiences by personifying the spirits of evil in the form of the night-hags of tradition, yet when intently observed, and the relations they bear to Macbeth, as a human being, are considered, they take on a higher signification and become concrete symbols of that element of negation and destructiveness that is opposed to all order and growth; to virtue, indeed, in its every phase. The poet by the means of these foul creatures gives us a dim vision of the fact that disorder and evil in the physical world have their correspondences in the world of spirit; and, as man partakes of the elements of both worlds he is subject to influences from both. Whether Shakespeare believed in witches, is unimportant, but that he did believe in the spiritual state, or condition, of which they are but the projection, is of vast importance, and, I think, demonstrable. The Witches are spirits of evil in its most active and malignant form. They are dwellers in the whirlwinds, and of the night; they plague mankind, and deceive him by factitious shows; they brew poisonous broths composed of vile creatures, of dead bodies, of the remnants of things. Now what is evil according to the poet, as may be inferred from his plays taken as a whole? It is the absence of light, of order, of beauty, of faith, of loyalty; absence, indeed, of all of those qualities that permit life to unfold into its flowers of perfect individuals, families, and states. In contrast with the Witches and their infernal cosmos, stand the poet's words in the *Sonnets*, expressing his conception of the world of beauty, truth, and morality:

Therefore my verse to constancy confined,
One thing expressing, leaves out difference.
"Fair, kind, and true," is all my argument,
"Fair, kind, and true," varying to other words;
And in this change is my invention spent,
Three themes in one, which wondrous scope affords.
"Fair, kind, and true," have often lived alone,
Which three till now never kept seat in one.

(*Sonnets*, CV)



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